



# ELSAH HISTORY

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## Why Save a Hat?



*Grand Army of the Republic Hat*

Why do visitors like to come to our local museum? The Museum Committee members, who curate exhibits and make recommendations on operations, often think about this question. As one committee member, I often come back to Dr. Charles Hosmer's introduction to *Elsie: A Historic Guidebook*, (Fifth Edition, Revised 1986). He says:

People are generally fascinated with such places, perhaps because they discover a side of themselves that existed before they did, a society built on different dimensions, living at a slower speed, with forgotten crafts, using simpler materials, suggesting lives lived in valid ways we no longer know.

Once visitors see the outside of the Village Hall, an historic building, they want to go inside and feel what it is like. When they enter the building, they will see exhibits and be able to identify objects with their own lives or their knowledge of American history. They might say "Oh, that is about the Civil War," "That is about WWI," "That huge bread bowl tells us there was a bakery here" and, "Look how long that wooden bread peel is" ('peel' - a shovel-like tool to place bread in an oven).

This article is about looking at objects and seeing more than just the objects themselves. I am writing about them in the context of an individual's life rather than just the statistics that we learn in textbooks (even though they are very important). I have chosen a few objects from the Civil War period to illustrate this "looking deeper and finding the story." I believe these objects resonate with our visitors because some are original historical artifacts. As such, they provide an extra level of meaning beyond an image in a book or even what a good reproduction can express.

I have chosen five objects. Three objects were donated by Nancy McDow, granddaughter of William H. McDow (1843-1920), the original owner. We have a Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) hat, a Civil War discharge paper, and a marriage certificate. The other two objects are related to the Elsay GAR Rutherford Post: a copy of a photograph of GAR Elsay Rutherford Post members and a copy of the GAR Rutherford Post Charter with the charter members' names.

First, there are some basic facts that need to be stated about the Civil War (1861-1865). This conflict had immense impact on the nation (31 million population at the time vs. 327.2 million currently) and on small individual communities, like Elsay. One estimate is that 620,000 soldiers died during the Civil War; others argue for a much higher number. Whichever number one estimates, it appears that more soldiers died in the Civil War than all the other wars, put together, fought by the continental United States soldiers\* from the Revolution to the Viet Nam War. Since America was still predominantly rural (McPherson), the impact was greatest in rural communities. In that time period, a death of one young, unmarried soldier meant the loss to the community of another family. One young unmarried soldier's death represents 5 to 10 family members. In a rural community, that is a substantial percentage of the population.

The Illinois Secretary of State provides a digital database of the Illinois Civil War Muster and Descriptive Rolls Detail Report ([url: http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/databases/datcivil.html](http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/databases/datcivil.html)). It can be searched by name, residence, regiment/unit. I searched using both "Elsay" and "Jersey Landing" as a residence and found over 50 individuals listed for our area alone.

Second, one needs to know a bit about the GAR. It was a national Union soldier organization formed in Springfield, Illinois in 1865. It was a fraternal organization that lobbied for benefits for injured soldiers, a pension for all Union Civil War service personnel, voting rights for African

American soldiers, Republican candidates and patriotic recognition of soldiers. They also promoted the establishment of a Memorial Day (called Decoration Day at that time).

What about the hat? We have two people to thank for this donation, Nancy McDow, granddaughter, who made the donation in 1981, and Lucy McDow, daughter, who saved the hat during her lifetime. The hat was put on public view almost 100 years after it was acquired. It was kept by McDow and his family long after the GAR post dissolved. I believe the hat was a representation of his service in the Civil War, and the impact of the war on him, his family and the general public. The impact is still felt today as we piece together information about the original owner, the donor, and the donation.

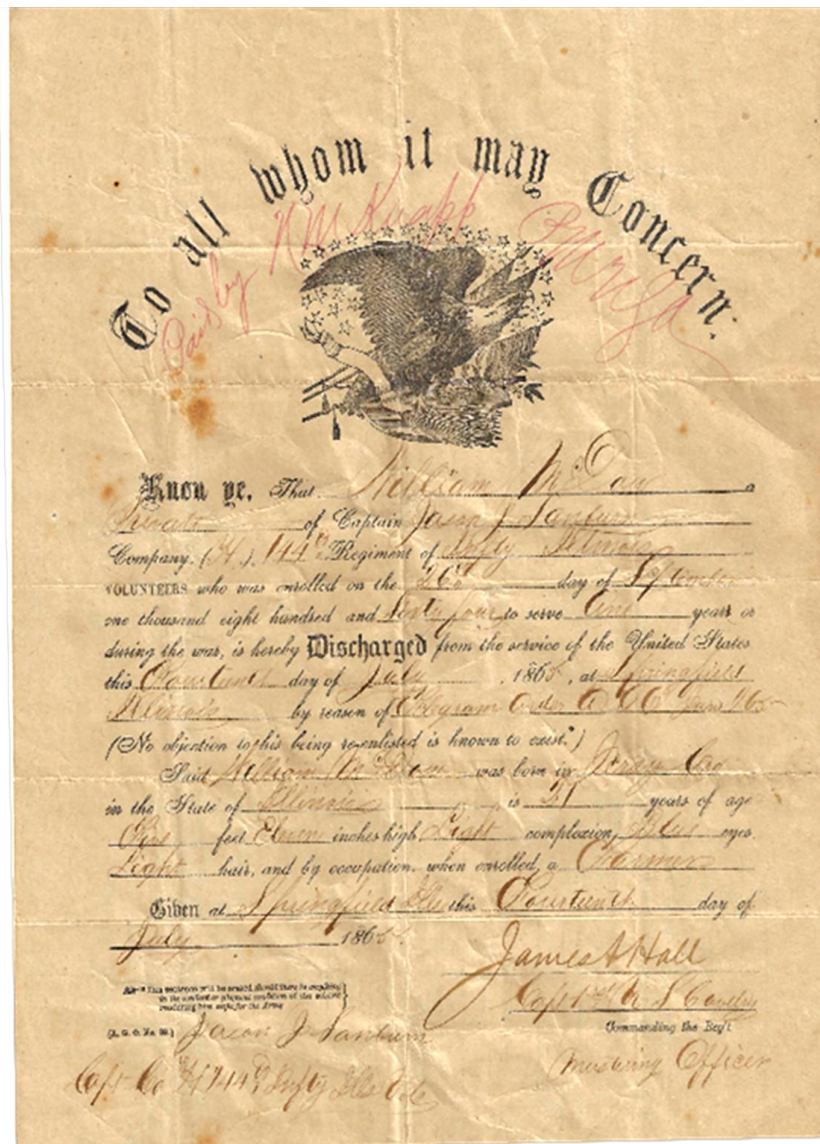
William H. McDow was part of an early and large family in Jersey County. They settled in the area that we now know as Newbern and Dow, Illinois. William H. McDow's brother, John H. McDow, was the first postmaster of Dow, Illinois and also managed a successful general store in Dow. On the Secretary of State's Civil War muster roll database, William H. McDow was listed as 21 years old when he joined the Civil War, Illinois 144<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Company H, organized out of Alton, Illinois. McDow volunteered on September 26, 1864 and was mustered in on October 1, 1864. The 144<sup>th</sup> Regiment did not submit a report on their action in the war to the Illinois Adjutant General, which accumulated the war history of the Illinois Civil War regiments. That history is now available online, but contains no entries from the Illinois 144<sup>th</sup> regiment. However, whatever happened, it was probably as an old combat adage states "War is long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror."

McDow's original discharge paper shows just a few additional pieces of information not listed in the Secretary of State Illinois Civil War Muster and Descriptive Rolls Detail Report. Written in red ink across the top is the information that he was paid. Since the unit was dissolved on July 14, 1865, my guess is the telegram order

indicated that information. The discharge is apparently not due to injury.

Also, the discharge paper as a document also shows something about the times and individuals' who completed it. The quality of the paper looks great for its age. The paper looks like it has less acid content than similar types of

documents generally used today. Paper with a high acid content might easily have disintegrated after 100 years. The penmanship of the document is superb. Secretaries/officers/clerks with such good penmanship were in great demand to fill out all those papers!



William H. McDow discharge paper

McDow moved to Elsah in 1881 and was one of the charter members of the local GAR which formed in April 1883. There were other Civil War veterans from the 144<sup>th</sup> regiment that lived in Elsah. William H. McDow was not one of the members signing the GAR disbandment

document in 1893. However, I did not find his name on any of the reports that indicated that he had been removed from active membership. I am assuming that his commitment to the GAR did not change, even if his name was not on the last document by the Elsah organization.





*McDow Huss Marriage Certificate front and verso*

McDow listed himself as a farmer when he joined the army and on the register of the GAR local post almost 20 years later. I wondered if being a farmer was more important and remunerative to him than being an owner of what became an Elsah general store. He acquired the building at 28 LaSalle (called the Union Hotel in *Elsah: A Historic Guidebook*) in

1881, at the age of about 37. While he was starting his business, he still actively improved his farm. The fact that McDow was a successful farmer is shown in his ownership of a Gaar Scott steam engine, parts of which are in the Museum. A steam engine was a great boon in farming mechanization at the time.

William H. McDow died in 1920. His obituary describes him as “prominent,” “one of the best-known residents of Jersey County” and states he had been “in business for 35 years.” Yet, even though he was well known for many other accomplishments, that memento of his Civil War service remained in his family for another 60 plus years.

His wife, Mary Huss McDow, was still alive when her husband died. On the back of their marriage certificate one can see some kraft paper tape. Like many documents of the period, it had been folded many times, and in this case the tape keeps the pieces together. On the tape and the original paper back are two stamp marks. Each one indicates that William McDow was a Civil War veteran. I think this shows that he received a Civil War pension and that his widow was claiming that pension when he died.

Having gotten this far in my research, I contacted Nancy McDow, granddaughter of William H. McDow, and learned a few more details. Nancy McDow did not really know her grandfather because he died in 1920 before she was born. She had heard family stories about him wanting to serve in the Civil War. The story

goes that he wrote in the insole of his shoe the number 18 and said he was over 18, and thus, eligible to serve in the Civil War. Perhaps, early in the war he tried to serve and was refused because of his youth. Nancy learned family stories from her grandmother, Mary Huss McDow, and her great aunt, Aunt Jo (Josephine Huss Keller). Another aunt, Lucy, lived in the 28 LaSalle building (known as the Union Hotel in *Elsah: A Historic Guidebook*). Lucy McDow lived there her whole life with the residence upstairs and a store downstairs. William H. McDow ran a saloon there before Elsah went “dry” in 1893. Nancy McDow said to me that, during Lucy McDow’s lifetime, the GAR hat remained on the peg upstairs just where William H. McDow left it.

Across the street from the Union Hotel is the home built by Nancy McDow’s father, Dewey McDow, son of William H. McDow. Dewey McDow built that house with wood purchased from the state of Washington. His employment with the railroad made it easier to order lumber and have it delivered to Elsah. I knew that similar houses were built in our area and I asked if it came from a plan book. She only knew that he had a building plan.



*Photograph of the Grand Army of the Republic, Rutherford Post*



# Grand Army of the Republic



((To all unto whom these Presents come, Greeting:))

**Know Ye,** That reposing full trust and confidence in the fidelity and patriotism of Comrades

E. M. Pinner  
Myron Randall  
William Tillham  
William Marshau  
William R. McDow  
James K. Francis  
Rev. Bartley  
L. C. Carrico  
P. W. Dougherty



P. Spangle  
Lewis Keller  
George Piggott  
A. Lightner  
William D. Collins  
J. P. Staten  
L. W. Palmer  
Alonso Swann  
and Jesse Cockrell

I do hereby, in Conformity with the Rules and Regulations of the Grand Army of the Republic, and by virtue of the power and authority in me vested, constitute them and their associates and successors a Post of the Grand Army of the Republic, to be known as  
Rutherford Post No Two Hundred and Six

Department of Illinois, (at Elmhurst)

And I authorize and empower them to perform all acts necessary to conduct said organization in accordance with the Rules and Regulations of the Grand Army of the Republic.

Dated at the Head Quarters of the Department of Illinois of the Grand Army of the Republic at Elmhurst on the 23rd day of March in the year of our Lord One thousand Eight hundred and Eighty Three and of our Independence the One hundred and Seventh

Samuel A. Harpner

Department Commander.

J. L. Bennett

Asst Adjutant General.

Lastly, I wanted to know if the GAR meeting minutes, reports and charter would have anything new to reveal about William H. McDow. These documents are not available as digital records. I made an appointment to use the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum and Library in Springfield, Illinois, to view the original documents. In this newsletter, courtesy of the Library, we reprinted a full page of the GAR charter for Elsah Rutherford Post (206). Perhaps some of our readers will tell us more about the process of writing the charter and the beautiful penmanship in both the charter and the early minutes. I did learn a few facts about the local chapter. The total register lists 79 members. However, the quarterly reports only show a maximum number of active members at any one time to be 42. The members represented various regiments and some from other states.

Like other GAR posts, the Elsah Rutherford Post was active in lobbying for Civil War benefits for the injured, and later for military pensions for all Union veterans. They were also a fraternal organization. They met at the Elsah Odd Fellows' Hall (I.O.O.F.) near the Mississippi River. The I.O.O.F. acquired the building in 1871, renting part of the first floor to the railroad.



The image above shows the building elevation from the valley looking to the Mississippi River. In addition to using the space themselves, the GAR sublet their space to those needing an

occasional space to meet. They purchased a desk as well as plates and utensils. They were active in honoring the veterans on Decoration Day. They gave talks at Chautauqua, had campfires on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, and provided a tombstone for a Union Civil War veteran who was indigent. On a few occasions they assisted widows of Union Civil War soldiers. They sent delegates to Springfield for GAR meetings.

It is interesting that the list of original members on the charter is slightly different from the list provided in the 1885 *History of Greene and Jersey County* (see url: <https://jersey.illinoisgenweb.org/jchistory/jc-elsah.htm>). This is the list as provided in that secondary source (I have printed in italic those on the original charter document):

The charter members of the organization were *E. M. Pinney, Lewis Keller, Alonzo F. Swan, Adam Lightner, William D. Collins, Terry Spangle, B. F. Slaten, L. C. Carrico, William H. McDow, William Burgess, William Deymond, Myron Hansell, P. W. Dougherty, James K. Francis, William Marshaw, George Piggott, Nes Hartley, William Gillham.*

Not on the above list, but on the charter document are: L. H. Palmer and Jesse Cocknell

It appears, then, we need to verify what we think we know. Secondary sources and original sources need to be compared. One can speculate, but one can be in error. There are explanations that may require some digging to verify. It is easy to be confused when dealing with a large family such as the McDow family. Names are repeated in every generation and even within the generation.

Despite the large gaps of my knowledge, I still feel amazement at the life of William H. McDow who came back from the Civil War and went on with his life. He is not an abstract number, but an individual and family man. He was older



when he married and went on to have six children. He started a business and operated a farm. He was active in the community being a member of the GAR. He tells us a story of a life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which was difficult but full of hope and accomplishment. In addition, he lived in our little village.

I would like to thank Nancy McDow for reviewing this article; and, Joe Kaposta for proofing my work. However, I take full responsibility for any errors, mistakes or misinterpretations in this article.

Thanks also goes to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum in Library for copying and allowing use of an image of the original charter Grand Army of the Republic, Rutherford Post charter.

\*Interview with Daniel Immerwahr author of *How to Hide an Empire: A History of The Greater United States* <https://www.npr.org/books/titles/694711739/how-to-hide-an-empire-a-history-of-the-greater-united-states>

I used the following resources:

*Prologue Magazine*, "Out of War, a New Nation," Spring 2010, Vol. 42, No. 1, by James M. McPherson, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2010/spring/newnation.html>

PBS/The Newshour, "The Civil War: Between the Battles," April 12, 2011, 10:25 am EDT, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/the-civil-war-between-the-battles>

Review of the Ken Burns documentary <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/the-civil-war-between-the-battles>

Historic Elsah Foundation newsletters (hard copies at the Historic Elsah Foundation offices and digital copies available at Archive.org)

*Elsah History*, no 37 & 38, Summer-Fall 1981. This issue is dedicated to Miss Lucy McDow, (Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., Editor)

*Elsah History*, no 58, 1990, "The Impact of the Civil War on Elsah" by Eric Nager, an article with footnotes (Charles B. Hosmer, Jr. Editor)

*Elsah History*, no 90, Autumn 2005, "At Home with Nancy McDow" (Marie Oleson, editor)

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum and Library

Records of the Illinois Grand Army of the Republic, Rutherford Post (206), Elsah, Illinois, Reports, Minutes, Register and Charter; the insert reproduced in this newsletter is courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum and Library.

Researched and written by Jane H. Pfeifer

## Historic Elsah Foundation News

### *Home for the Holidays*



The first Saturday in December is our annual fund-raising event and house tour, Home for the

Holidays. This year, the date and time are Saturday, December 7, 2019 from 12 noon to 4 p.m. We plan to have lovely historic homes decorated for the holidays, a horse and carriage, lunch, and other surprises. Mark your calendar and we hope to see you. If you are ready to volunteer, Blair Smith is the chair; please contact him through our email, [historicelsah@gmail.com](mailto:historicelsah@gmail.com). We are very grateful for all who make this event possible and as many attendees say, "Everyone is so happy and nice."



### *Timothy R. Tomlinson, President Emeritus*

The Board of Trustees regrets that Tim Tomlinson has decided that it was time to step down from the Historic Elsah Foundation board. He has served at least one year beyond the time he desired to retire from the board. We thank him for doing that. He leaves large shoes to fill. His service on the board and as President included his leadership on the Great Rivers Lincoln Coffin project for the reenactment celebration in Springfield, Illinois (see *Elsah History*, no. 107, Spring 2015 at <https://archive.org/search.php?query=Elsah%20History%20Lincoln%20coffin>). He also revived and obtained funding for our Hosmer Williams Lectures, now offered every year through the generous funding by Liberty Bank of Godfrey, Illinois.



*Tim Tomlinson at the Lincoln Coming Home reenactment*

The Lincoln Coffin project on which he and George Provenzano worked with great energy and cooperation included in addition to Historic Elsah Foundation, the Chautauqua Historical Society and Grafton Historical Society. This marked a new, wider vision of our local history education work.

He enhanced the 1975 Historic Elsah Foundation leaflet no 5, *Chautauqua, Illinois: A Brief History*, by William T. Fabian by reproducing the material (with permission from Fabian) and adding additional and updated information. It became the book *The Western Chautauqua, A History of New Piasa Chautauqua*, (Chautauqua, IL, Chautauqua Historical Society, 2010). Historic Elsah Foundation has copies for \$15.95, if you happen to have missed it.

Tomlinson led us in various fundraising projects that have allowed us to maintain and offer our properties, Farley Music Hall and the Ice House ruin, for public use. We will miss his leadership and vision. To his already well-established titles, Board emeritus, Chautauqua Historical Society and Associate Director emeritus, Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania, we gratefully add our own President emeritus, Historic Elsah Foundation.

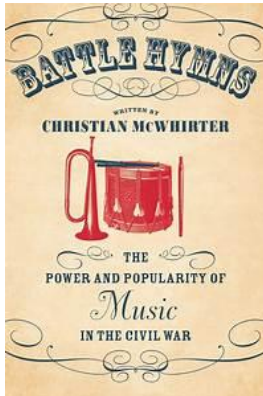
He has promised to continue to help us. We are grateful to accept. We also thank Rose Tomlinson, his wife, for her supportive work. Thank you, Tim and Rose, for sharing your retirement with HEF.

### *Hosmer Williams Lectures*

This year, George Provenzano is serving again as chair of the Hosmer Williams Lectures. Last year, one of the lectures was by Ian Patrick Hunt, Chief of Acquisitions, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. Hunt showed clips from the 2012 blockbuster film, *Lincoln*, and compared them with the actual history as known in the documents. We had our own “blockbuster” packed house for the talk.

This year our lectures series opened with a rescheduled talk celebrating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Illinois as a state. On March 21 we had another 2019 Civil War topic with a lecture titled “How a Chicago Music Store Helped Win the Civil War,” by Christian McWhirter, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, with Edwardsville fiddler, Hannah Jellen, and banjo player, Ben Holbrook

playing the various songs discussed in the lecture. The music by Jellen and Holbrook and the lecture made for a very popular event and we all learned new aspects to the Civil War.



*Christian  
McWhirter's  
book.  
Published in  
2014*

Three more talks are planned:

To be rescheduled: "The Stories That Shape Us," Janet Riehl, Godfrey, Illinois;

Thursday, September 19, 2019: "The Semples of Elsay," George Provenzano, Lewis and Clark Community College; and

Thursday, November 14, 2019: "Antislavery Activism on the Frontier: The Story of the English Prairie," Caroline Kisiel, School for New Learning, DePaul University.

We thank George Provenzano for his work on this project, both for expanding our educational program and furthering our program of community outreach.

### *Village of Elsay Museum Photography Exhibit*

The Village of Elsay government and Historic Elsay Foundation jointly provide the Village of Elsay Museum. Historic Elsay Foundation is grateful for this relationship and the assistance of the Village of Elsay, both operating the Museum and maintaining the Village Hall for the Museum.



*"The Green Tree Inn"*

For the past twenty years, the Museum has had an annual photography exhibit to celebrate Elsay and the immediate area. This year, the photography winner is Carolyn Schlueter of St. Charles, Missouri. Her photograph, "Green Tree Inn," is the winner of the Purchase Prize, provided by the Village of Elsay. While our

reproduction may not show the full contrast and color tone, our judge, Erica Popp, said that the color of the sky and the warm glow from the interior lights was especially inviting and expressive of the theme, "Joy and Discovery in Elsay." In addition to purchasing her photograph, the Museum receives permission to use the photograph in publicity about this and next year's exhibit. Schlueter participated in many of our exhibits and previously won the purchase prize, in 2009 and 2014. She shows her work in many venues in the area and won other competitions including the St. Louis Camera Club and most recently, the AAA *Midwest Traveler Magazine* (July/August 2019) competition. In addition to the cash prize, the Green Tree Inn offers an overnight stay to the Village of Elsay Purchase Prize winner.

There was no Greatriverroad.com Purchase Prize because all the submissions were taken in the valley area of the Village of Elsay. The Museum thanks and is very grateful to John Tomlinson of greatriverroad.com for supporting this prize.

This year, the Museum added a youth section to our exhibit to encourage young photographers from 12 to 18 to participate and be judged with



their peers. A special donation to Historic Elsah Foundation makes possible this award. There were four youth submissions. Jonah Hosmer won with his “Elsah Reflection.”

In addition, we had a youth photography workshop to help young people with their submissions and skills. The workshop, at Farley Music Hall, was led by two previous winners of our exhibit: Marty McKay and Karen King. We thank them. We also thank the Alton Office Depot store manager, who provided a free print to each youth workshop participant.

Four special recognition photographs were awarded. They include: Rachel Baker’s “Through the Keyhole” for composition; Lynn Moore’s “Enchanted Entry” for use of color; Joan Baker’s “Read to Discover” for expression of theme; and, for a youth participant, Micha Worley’s “Coming Home on the River Road” for unique use of the camera. All the special recognition photographers are awarded a 10% discount on framing of one object at Burton Art

Services, Alton, Illinois. HEF thanks Dianne Burton for her help with this project. Also, we thank her for archival framing of Museum pieces.

Lastly, the Museum thanks our photography judge, Erica Popp, for her professional expertise evaluating our exhibit submissions and attending our opening reception. And, HEF thanks the Museum Committee for their work. The members are Connie Davis, Marjorie Doerr, Mary Lu Peters, Jane Pfeifer, Mary Anne Schmidt, and Sandra Stack.

The Museum invites you to stop and see the exhibit which is open until August 4, 2019, Saturdays and Sundays from 1 to 4 p.m. If you are interested in submitting to this annual exhibit, see the photography exhibit instructions at [escapetoelsah.com](http://escapetoelsah.com). The theme for next year, 2020, is “My Favorite Window,” and for 2021 the theme is “Elsah Postcard – Wish You Were Here.”

### *Facebook and Receiving your Elsah History as a PDF*

If you are a Facebook user and have not “liked” us yet, now is the time. If you have liked us, have you checked on our latest updates? You can also give us and share information through our Facebook page.

If you are interested in getting your *Elsah History* in a digital format, let us know via email and we will send you the next issue as a PDF. If you are seeking past issues, Historic Elsah Foundation has hard copies for sale, but you can also print out a copy from Archive.org.

### *Our Purposes*

The purposes of Historic Elsah Foundation as stated in the articles of Incorporation (1971) are: “...the preservation and enhancement of the historic buildings, architecture and culture of the Village of Elsah, Illinois, and the establishment of an education program to inform the general public of the historical and the educational values of the Village.”

### *Spring 2019 Flood*



*View of River Road by Riverview House*



*View of Mill and Maple Streets, looking north*

Even though we know flooding is part of living along the Mississippi, it is never a welcome event. The front of the Village flooded on and off this spring. The lower road was closed and the tenants in Riverview House moved out. The River Road first closed on May 3. It reopened in May 21 but closed again May 23. Great Rivers Land Trust, owner of Riverview, worked diligently to keep water out of the first floor. Every three hours the pumps needed to be attended. We thank them for their work.

Other homeowners and renters had flooded basements and inoperable septic systems. As a precaution HEF moved everything out of the first floor of Farley Music Hall.

As of this publication, we regret to report that the flood waters are high, and a new flood record is anticipated.

#### **Historic Elsah Foundation Board 2019**

President: vacant  
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#### **Board Members**

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 George Provenzano  
 Alley Ringhausen  
 Mary Anne Schmidt  
 Ruth Sparks  
 Sandra Stack

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#### **Guest Editor: Jane Pfeifer**

Copy editor: Joe Kaposta

#### **Memberships for 2019**

Patron:	\$25 to \$99
Supporter:	\$100 to \$249
Founders' Circle:	\$250 and above
James Semple Business Associate:	\$100

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